

The Functions of Prosody in Discourse Analysis - A Case Study of Tags in Mandarin Talk Shows

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Abstract

This paper reports on a corpus-based medium communication study comparing the syntactic form, pragmatic use, and prosodic features of tags by native speakers of Mandarin Chinese. Different discourse situations require dissimilar prosodic strategies. The paper addresses the problem of tags as discourse markers and prosodic prominence in various interactive discourses of Mandarin. It outlines the main findings and seeks to explain the forms and functions of pragmatic tags. Prosodic variation of tags is correlated with the position in relation to the turns in the conversation and the social situations. The prosodic features of tags denote various functions in the multi-receiver discourse.

1. Introduction

This study explores how Mandarin tags differ from questions in conversation and how prosody facilitates communication in multi-receiver discourses. Earlier work (Li & Thompson, 1981; Chen & He, 2001) on Mandarin tag *dui bu dui* 'correct-not-correct' sought an account in terms of syntactic form A-not-A or pragmatic analysis, without accounting for the possible role of phrase-level prosodic features in conversation. It has been recognized that prosody serves as a cue for mutual agreement, disagreement or negotiation among conversation participants (Swerts & Geluykens, 1994; Yaeger-Dror, 2002). It has also been proposed that prosodic tone is associated with the pragmatic functions of tags (Algeo, 1988). In the present study, I treat prosody as a strategy in various interactive conversations. The social situation of TV talk shows requires specific prosodic strategy, and the discourse both the hosts and the interviewees are engaged in assigns the functions of the tags.

Turn-taking, according to Levinson (1983), is an A-B-A-B-A-B distribution of talk across two participants. However, the speech stream in TV talk shows may be delivered with three-part or four-part structure. In the present study, tag tokens were analyzed in terms of

its placement in relation to the turns in the conversation, the topic and activity units with which tags are used. I will show that tags are not only tag questions to reinforce the illocutionary force of the proposition they are tagged to, but also multi-functional pragmatic markers to signal transitions, emphatic emotion, exclamation, to help the hosts maintain the addressee's attention in given topics and activities, to show the agreement or disagreement positions, and to beg negotiation in the specific speech situation of TV talk shows. I will further elucidate the prosodic variation imposed on the tag tokens.

It is widely recognized that syntactic position influences the likelihood of prosodic prominence. It is also true that the placement of tags in relation to Turn-Construction-Units (TCUs) influences the prosodic realization. In addition, prosodic prominence is manipulated differently even for apparently similar pragmatic functions. The integration of multi-functions into a single tag *dui bu dui* 'correct-not-correct', for instance, is a natural consequence in TV talk shows. The evidence is drawn from the interactive solidarity, the confirmatory illocutionary force, the multiple agreements, and the outcome of the debate. The single tag *dui bu dui* 'correct-not-correct' may have many other pragmatic functions.

The present study aims to investigate the prosodic prominence in the most three salient dissimilar categories: *dui bu dui* 'correct-not-correct' as a tag question, *dui bu dui* 'correct-not-correct' as a multi-functional pragmatic marker and the marked form *dui bu dui, hoNh* 'correct-not-correct, right'. The marked form consists of structural complexity, with *dui bu dui* 'correct-not-correct' followed by an equivalent particle *hoNh* 'right' in Taiwanese (a dialect spoken in Taiwan). The goal of the study is to investigate the multi-functions and prosody of the markers 'A-not-A' tags in conversation and multi-receiver discourses. In the present study, I will focus upon the problem of tags, the corpus, an empirical analysis of the prosodic prominence in three categories of tags, and the prosodic strategies. The analysis of tags in Mandarin provides quantitative and qualitative evidence that linguistic and situational factors must be treated as variables for the analysis of prosodic strategies.

2. Tags in Mandarin conversation

2.1. Syntactic structure

In Mandarin, A-not-A can be formed by a verb, an adjective, or an adverb. Structurally, tag question 'A-not-A' follows the main clause, attached to the end of the main clause. A statement can become a question by the addition of a short A-not-A question form as a tag to that statement. The most common tags are *dui bu dui* 'correct not

correct', *hao bu hao* 'good not good', *xing bu xing* 'OK not OK', and *shi bu shi* 'be not be'.

The difference between an A-not-A question and a tag question lies in what they seek as a question. According to Li & Thompson (1981), a tag question seeks confirmation of the statement that occurs before the tag, whereas an A-not-A question seeks an answer that confirms or denies the proposition in the question. To form an A-not-A question, it can appear sentence initially, medially, finally, or independently. However, to form a tag question, it can only appear after a main clause or a statement. In the present study, both A-not-A questions and tags in the corpus were examined.

2.2. Pragmatic functions

Li & Thompson (1981) have mentioned that tag questions are functionally different from the other types of Mandarin questions. Chen & He (2001) examine the tag *dui bu dui* 'correct-not-correct' in classroom setting and have found that the pragmatic functions of non-A-not-A questions express non-propositional messages.

In the present study, I extend the framework of pragmatic tags in terms of the relation between pragmatic functions and prosodic prominence. The social factors such as speech situation, solidarity, personal relationship, pauses and silence are also involved in the use of tags. On the other hand, acoustic variables, such as pitch high, pitch range, durations, pauses, and amplitude, as communicative strategies must be incorporated as factors for the analysis of tags. The data was drawn from the informal TV talk shows. In each episode, there was a focus topic. The number of the participants in the discourse was always more than four. In the speech situation of TV shows, the interaction between the hosts and the interviewees was frequent, and one question-answer pair could be embedded within another. Besides, many colloquial forms, slang, causal particles, code-switching tokens were also found in the corpus.

2.3. Utterance-final particle 'hoNh' in Taiwanese

Thirty-six tokens of the Taiwanese particle *hoNh* 'right' were found immediately preceding or following the tag *dui bu dui* 'correct-not-correct' in the corpus. It is called a marked form here because of its structural complexity. Taiwanese *hoNh* 'right' is found probably only in spoken languages. Earlier work (Li, 1999) analyzed *hoNh* 'right' as a question particle, used in a question in which a positive answer is expected. *HoNh* 'right' is also used to form a question to which the speaker already has a positive answer and does not require an answer from the addressee. To sum up, *hoNh* 'right' is mainly used to request for confirmation on the speaker's preconceived position.

Apparently, there are quite a few similarities between Mandarin tag *dui bu dui* 'correct-not-correct' and Taiwanese *hoNh* 'right'. In the present study, I treat Taiwanese *hoNh* as a vocal equivalent of Mandarin *dui bu dui*. Accordingly, the structurally complex '*dui bu dui, hoNh*' or '*hoNh, dui bu dui*' literally means 'Right? Right?' Yet, several factors are involved in the marked form 'Right? Right?', such as pragmatic functions, Code-Switching, and prosodic prominence.

3. Methodology

Mandarin tag tokens were quantitatively and qualitatively studied. Tag tokens in the corpus were compiled and classified into different categories. On the other hand, the spoken tokens were computerized using speech program Praat. Empirical measurements of tag tokens were done to investigate the interaction between acoustic variables and multi-functions of tags.

The voice data were transcribed from TV talk shows, in which the conversation between hosts and interviewees consisted of numerous tags in natural speech. Three hosts and twenty interviewees were included in the data. The length of the tape recording was 180 minutes. In each episode, the hosts invited 3-5 interviewees to join the discussion. The discussion covered a wide range of topics, such as fashion, family violence, men and women, revenge, women's health, social care...etc. The speech situation of the talk shows was informal. There were occasionally some audiences on the spot. Most of the audiences were bilinguals.

The tag tokens found in the corpus were quantitatively summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of the corpus

| Tags | <i>dui bu dui</i> | <i>hao bu hao</i> |
|---|---|-------------------|
| Response (%) | 14.66% | 0% |
| Positive or Negative/ Total Response | Positive Response: 94.11% Negative Response: 5.88% | |
| Host (%) | 86.21% | 100% |
| Non-Host (%) | 13.79% | 0% |
| Total (tokens) | 116 | 6 |
| Frequency of Tags (%) | 95.08% | 4.92% |

Shown in Table 1, only 14.66% of the tags in the multi-receiver discourses got responses. It is clear that tags are more than tag questions and more likely to be multi-functional pragmatic markers in TV talk shows. Moreover, almost all the responses received were positive. The hosts elicited tags much more frequently than the interviewees. Though six tokens of the tag *hao bu hao* 'good-not-good' were found in the corpus, I did not account for their occurrence due to the low frequency in the corpus.

4. An Acoustic Analysis

I propose that the prosodic prominence is manipulated as a strategy to facilitate the communication in TV talk shows. The following section presents the interaction between acoustic variables and the functions of tags in TV talk shows. Namely, how prosodic prominence is imposed on the dissimilar types of tags. Four acoustic variables investigated here are pitch contour, durations, pauses, and amplitude. On the other hand, tags are classified into three categories in terms of both grammatical forms and pragmatic functions: tags as tag questions, tags as multi-functional pragmatic markers, and the marked forms with both Mandarin and Taiwanese tags.

4.1. The prosody of tags as tag questions

Tokens of tags as tag questions could be identified when they got a response. When the token appears at the end of the host's turn, and the hearer's response takes the next turn, it has a lower-pitch beginning and a higher-pitch ending. A higher-pitch ending could be a cue to asking for confirmation or information. However, when the token appears at the medial position of the turn, followed by the other string of elaboration, it has a higher-pitch beginning and a lower-pitch ending. This indicates that prosodic pitch contour of tags is correlated with the position in relation to the turns in the conversation.

On the other hand, durations and amplitude are also indexes for the identification of a tag question. Tokens of tag questions have much shorter duration (an average of 131msc) than those of pragmatic markers (an average 349msc). Tokens of tag questions have stronger amplitude (an average of 90dB) than those of pragmatic markers (an average of 80dB). The results have shown that prosodic prominence is used as a strategy to facilitate the communication between the hosts and the interviewees in the TV talk shows.

4.2. The prosody of tags as pragmatic markers

When the tags were used as pragmatic markers, they signaled the transitions of not only illocutionary force but also language codes. Tokens of pragmatic markers have shown much wider pitch range and longer durations than the other tag tokens in the same speech situation. This indicates wider pitch range and longer durations may be cues to a salient transition. Yet, the measurements of other acoustic variables, such as amplitude and pause, are not significant in the correlation with pragmatic functions here.

Emphatic tone of a speaker is associated with pitch range and longer durations, rather than amplitude. Negotiation request markers, on the other hand, have higher pitch range than the other tokens in

adjacent turns for other functions. The prosodic features of a negotiation request marker are similar to those of an emphatic tone and an attention maintainer. This indicates in multi-receiver discourses the multi-functions of tags may be integrated into a continuum.

When a tag was used as conversation filler, it has level pitch contour with lower amplitude. Preceding pauses also trigger tokens of conversation filler. As far as pragmatic markers are concerned, independently formed tokens without tagging to the main clauses or previous propositions have longer durations than the tagged ones. It is quite consistent that pragmatic markers did not end with a high-pitch rising, except the situation that a Taiwanese tag *hoNh* 'right' followed *dui bu dui* 'correct-not-correct'.

4.3. The prosody of the marked form 'dui bu dui, hoNh'

Two types of the marked forms are examined here: *dui bu dui, hoNh* with pause and *dui bu dui hoNh* without pause.

It is quite clear that the variable of pause is associated with the position of the turns. When the marked token occurred at the medial position of a turn, no pause was found between *dui bu dui* and *hoNh*. However, when the token occurred at the end of a turn, a salient pause was found between *dui bu dui* and *hoNh*. Tokens with shorter pauses usually have higher pitch range, whereas tokens with longer pauses have lower pitch range. Pauses could be used to soften the tone in speech. Tokens without pauses could be tag questions only. This indicates that the pauses between *dui bu dui* 'correct-not-correct' and *hoNh* 'right' are associated with social meanings, such as solidarity and politeness. This is the direct evidence that prosody is a strategy in conversation.

5. Conclusion

In this study, the multi-functions of tags and their correlation with prosodic prominences have been investigated. The results have shown that tags are more than questions and serve as multi-functional pragmatic markers in TV talk shows. The hosts used tags to seek confirmation or information, to express emphatic tone or exclamation, to arouse the interviewee's interest, or maintain the interviewee's attention. In addition, tags were used as negotiation request markers to trigger the participation of the interviewees, transitions of illocutionary force, conversation fillers to substitute for pauses or silence. The use of tags is a strategy in conversation, as a speaker-oriented request without the expectation of getting a response from the hearer.

On the other hand, the interaction between four acoustic variables and three categories of tags has been investigated. Pitch contour is correlated with position in relation to the turns in the conversation. Tokens of tag questions have stronger amplitude and shorter duration, and emphatic tone is correlated with wider pitch range and longer durations, rather than amplitude. Tokens of conversation filler have level pitch contour with lower amplitude. Pauses in the turns trigger conversation filler. Independently formed pragmatic markers have longer duration than the tagged ones. Tokens of negotiation request markers have higher pitch range. Pauses could be associated with the social meanings of solidarity and politeness.

It is concluded that tags in Mandarin TV talk shows are much more frequently host-oriented and self-centered. The social situation requires specific prosodic strategies. The features of prosody denote various functions in multi-receiver discourses.

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